THE RED HAND OF ULSTER: A CRUTHIN ORIGIN STORY

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The Red Hand of Ulster: A Cruthin Origin Story

The Red Hand of Ulster is often, and blindly, accepted as being the "'Red Hand' of Ó Néill"[1]. This has the implication that the PUL community is mistaken to use this so-called Gaelic symbol associated with a tribe who resisted the British, but is this true? Can the multiple Cruthin origin stories of this symbol just be ignored? I posit that they cannot.

1. Cruthin and the Uí Echach

Benjamin Hazard in his article for *History Ireland* wrote of: "A fifteenth-century poem addressed to Art Mac Aodha mhic Airt Mhéig Aonghusa, chief of Uíbh Eathach in present-day County Down, claimed that the Uíbh Eathach and their ancestors, the Ulaidh, were the true warriors of the Red Hand." [2] Although he omits the name of this poem and the tribe the Eathach originate from, the title of it is '*Lámh dhearg Éireann í Eachach',* it was written by Mael Ó hÚigínn, and is about one of the Cruthin tribes.[3] The opening line, a variation of the title *Lamh dhearg Éiriond Ibh Eathoch,* is translated as "The Uí Eachach are the Red Hand of Ireland." [4] [5] Although this may sound like just another tribe, like the Uí Néill, it is a mistake to interpret it like this.

The Uí Eachach were a Cruthin tribe, settled in the territory of Iveagh. The "Uí Echach shared the kingship of east Ulster […] with Dál nAraide of south Antrim, who, like Uí Echach, belonged to the ethnic group called Cruthin." [6] Dál nAraide was itself a Cruthin kingdom, likely a confederation of various Cruthin tribes, I claim this as University College Cork has noted: "Uí Echach Cobo [were] the most prominent sept of Dál nAraidi." [7]**.** Dr. Ian Adamson further corroborates this identification by stating: "Their [the Cruthin's] ruling dynasties included the Dál nAraidi (Dalaradia) in southern Antrim, the Uí Echach Cobo (Iveagh) in western Down, and the Cenél Conaill in Donegal." [8] Similarly, A. J. Hughes & R. J. Hanna wrote: "East of the

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[1] National Library of Ireland, Heraldry in Ireland

[2] *'At Ó Néill's Right Hand: Flaithrí Ó Maolchonaire and the Red Hand of Ulster'* By Benjamin Hazard for History Ireland – Archive.org and archive.is links

[3] Poem is readable here – archive.org and archive.is links here

[4] Archive.org and archive.is links

[5] Gordon Ó Riain, *VARIA III* (2011) and *VARIA I* (2013)

[6] Iveagh Upper, Lower Half, County Down

[7] Paragraph 115, Anonymous, "Early Irish Population-Groups: Their Nomenclature, Classification, and Chronology," Celt.ucc.ie

[8] The Academic Suppression of the history of the native British or Cruthin, the People of the Pretani – I would like to note that the sources, outside of Dr. Adamson, have agreed.

Bann the Dál Fiatach (the historic Ulaid) shared the kingship of the reduced Ulster with Dál nAraidi and Ui Echach Coba, both originally Cruthin tribes"[9]

Therefore, we have a basis to argue that the Red Hand is a Cruthin symbol, after all: Lamh dhearg Éiriond Ibh Eathoch. This goes against the common mistake that the Red Hand belongs to the Uí Néill's, there is valid claim to it, from the Uí Eachach — the Cruthin.

This goes against the Gaelic claim as well, given these "… ancient people … from whom Britain was named"[10] are likely to be "non-Goidels"[11], as they are seen as having a "… pre-Goidelic origin" that which was "recognized when this account was first committed to writing"[12]. Gaelic, at the time, did not possess the *p* sound.[13] This is important as the original name of the Cruthin is possibly Pritani[14] (or Priteni). This is especially important given the likes of the Uí Néill are a Gaelic tribe; it means the Red Hand of Ulster completely predates the Uí Néill, so how could it be *their* symbol, rather than that of the Cruthin? I also reference to the last page where PlaceNamesNI.org refers to the Cruthin as an "ethnic group".

Andy Tyrie, Supreme Commander of the UDA, with an Ulster banner behind him that features the Red Hand of Ulster.

[9] Place names of Northern Ireland, Volume Two, by A.J. Hughes and R.J. Hannan, Queen's University of Belfast, Department of Celtic, Northern Ireland Place-Name Project – Archive.is link
[10] Jonathan Bardon, p.g. 14 of *'A History of Ulster'* – archive.org and archive.is links
[11] T. F. O'Rahilly, p.g., 348 of *'Early Irish History and Mythology'* – Archive.org and Archive.is links
[12] T. F. O'Rahilly, p.g., 349 of *'Early Irish History and Mythology'* – Archive.org and Archive.is links
[13] W.B. Lockwood, p.g., 17 of *'Languages of the British Isles Past and Present'* – *Archive.org and Archive.is links*
[14] Jonathan Bardon, p.g. 14 of *'A History of Ulster'*

2. Conall Cernach and Sétanta

Another possible origin of the Red Hand of Ulster is the story of Conall Cernach's avengement of Sétanta. These come from the Ulster poet Diarmaid Mac an Bhaird (a bardic poet). The poem claims that the "origin of the symbol is … that Conall Cearnach left the impression of his blood-stained hand on a standard while avenging Cú Chulainn's death."[15] [16] Quite luckily, we know Cernach was a Cruthin[17] [18] [19] [20] [21] [22] [23], who was an ancestor for the Kings of Dál nAraidi[24] [25] [26] [27] & the Conaille Muirtheimne[28] (a Cruthin kingdom in Louth) alongside being the ancestor of the Ui Echach Coba. [29] [30] [31] This works in tandem with the Uí Eachach being the heirs of the Red Hand as they trace their ancestry to Cernach. This is likely why the Uí Eachach adopted the symbol originally to begin with as well.

Diarmaid Mac an Bhaird would also address a poem to Cormac – likely Mac Airt Oig Ui Néill of Clandeboye – just before 1690, advising him to not use the Red Hand, "… as this belonged to the Magennis clan".[32] The Magennis descend from Sárán**,** a king of Dal nAraide[33] and Cruthin

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[15] Gordon Ó Riain, p.g., 2 of '*VARIA III. Quatrains Relating to the Controversy of the Red Hand*', *Ériu* 61 (2011): 171–78 – archive.org and archive.is links

[16] Anne Harper, "Conall Cearnach," Save Knock Iveagh, 2018 – archive.org and archive.is links

[17] Margaret E Dobbs, p.g., 9 of '*The Traditions of Conall Cernach*,' *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 19, no. 2 (1929): 116–27 – archive.org and archive.is links

[18] T. F. O'Rahilly, p.g., 538 of '*Early Irish History and Mythology*' – archive.org and archive.is links

[19] T. F. O'Rahilly, p.g., 30 of '*Early Irish History and Mythology*' – archive.org and archive.is links

[20] T. F. O'Rahilly, p.g., 350 of '*Early Irish History and Mythology*' – archive.org and archive.is links

[21] T. F. O'Rahilly, p.g., 377 of '*Early Irish History and Mythology*' – archive.org and archive.is

[22] Margaret E Dobbs, p.g., 8 of '*The Traditions of Conall Cernach*,' *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 19, no. 2 (1929): 116–27 – archive.org and archive.is links

[23] Paragraph 120, Anonymous, "Early Irish Population-Groups: Their Nomenclature, Classification, and Chronology," Celt.ucc.ie

[24] Margaret E Dobbs, p.g., 1 of '*The Traditions of Conall Cernach*,' *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 19, no. 2 (1929): 116–27 – archive.org and archive.is links

[25] T. F. O'Rahilly, p.g., 350 of '*Early Irish History and Mythology*' – archive.org and archive.is links

[26] Margaret E Dobbs, p.g., 8 of '*The Traditions of Conall Cernach*,' *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 19, no. 2 (1929): 116–27 – archive.org and archive.is links

[27] Paragraph 119, Anonymous, "Early Irish Population-Groups: Their Nomenclature, Classification, and Chronology," Celt.ucc.ie

[28] Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin, "Conall Cernach," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, October 1, 2009 – archive.org and archive.is links

[29] Margaret E Dobbs, p.g., 9 of '*The Traditions of Conall Cernach*,' *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 19, no. 2 (1929): 116–27 – archive.org and archive.is links

[30] Margaret E Dobbs, p.g., 10 of '*The Traditions of Conall Cernach*,' *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 19, no. 2 (1929): 116–27 – archive.org and archive.is links

[31] Anne Harper, "Conall Cearnach," Save Knock Iveagh, 2018 – archive.org and archive.is links

[32] A.J Hughes, "'The Seventeenth-Century Ulster/Scottish Contention of the Red Hand: Background and Significance,'" *Gaelic and Scots in Harmony, Proceedings of the Second International Conference on the Languages of Scotland*, 1998, 78–96. – archive.org and archive.is links

[33] Éanna MacAonghusa, "MacAonghusa - Brief History of the McGuinness, MacAonghusa Name," Ssi-developer.net, 2007 – archive.is link

political figure.[34] This is alongside a descent from the Uí Eachach[35] [36] who we have already established are a Cruthin tribe.

3. A Quick Note about the Uí Néill

I feel it is important to remember that these stories predate the Northern Uí Néill a significant amount, alongside having actual stories we can source from. The two Uí Néill boat races imply they are coming from Britian as one race is with Vikings,[37] but why would the Uí Néill be with Vikings? Excluding the fact the Uí Néill are Gaelic, and the Vikings are Nordic, by the time the Vikings had reached Scotland, let alone Ulster, the Cruthine (who are pre-Gaelic might I add), Conall Cernach and Ui Echach Cobo would already have the Red Hand of Ulster to call their own. The other story comes with rivalling Scottish clans[38]. The problem with this is the story is about the MacDonnells[39], who notably are not the Uí Néill, first arrived in Ulster in the 14th century[40]. The third Uí Néill origin is the Dextra Dei (Hand of God), a Christian symbol that symbolises the hand of God.[41] This third story would entitle all Christians to the symbol, including Protestants. An example of this is the emblem of John Calvin[42]. Therefore, not just the Uí Néill's can claim the Red Hand of Ulster, it is a Christian wide symbol. Apart from anything else, why would they have chosen a *red* hand to represent the Dextra Dei? It's a very specific colour to choose, when all other instances of this symbol, from this era, have the Dextra Dei in the colour of skin.

In actuality, it was well known, and even publicly asserted by 17th century O'Neill writers, that "… the Red Hand was the right of Magenis, but that the O'Neills wrested it to themselves, and have continued to usurp it to this day."[43] Therefore, "… it was well known that the symbol [the Red Hand] properly belonged to Maginnis of Iveagh, representing the kings of the Cruithni."[44]

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[34] Bell, Robert p.g., 162 of '*The Book of Ulster Surnames*', Blackstaff Press Ltd, 1997 – Archive.org and Archive.is links

[35] James O'Laverty, "The Barony of Iveagh," Libraryireland.com – Archive.org and Archive.is links

[36] John Grenham, "Magennis Surname History," Johngrenham.com – Archive.org and Archive.is links

[37] Stephen A. Brighton, p.g., 7-8 of "Symbols, Myth-Making, and Identity: The Red Hand of Ulster in Late Nineteenth-Century Paterson, New Jersey," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (June 2004): 149–64 – p.g., 7 archive.org and archive.is, p.g., 8 archive.org and archive.is links

[38] Stephen A. Brighton, p.g., 8 of "Symbols, Myth-Making, and Identity: The Red Hand of Ulster in Late Nineteenth-Century Paterson, New Jersey," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (June 2004): 149–64 – archive.org and archive.is links

[39] James Mackillop, p.g., 371 of '*Dictionary of Celtic Mythology'.* (Oxford University Press, 2004) – archive.org and archive.is links

[40] "The Antrim McDonnell Heritage Centre," Glenarm Castle & Garden – archive.org and archive.is links

[41] National Library of Ireland, Heraldry in Ireland

[42] Calvin University, "The Calvin Seal | Calvin University," – archive.org and archive.is links

[43] Eugene O'curry, '*On the Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish: A Series of Lectures*', vol. 3 (London, 1873), 278 – archive.org and archive.is links

[44] Donald M. Schlegel, p.g., 60 of '*Reweaving the Tapestry of Ancient Ulster*,' *Clogher Record* 17, no. 3 (2002): 689–750, https://doi.org/10.2307/27699470. – archive.org and archive.is links

The head of the O'Neill family admitted it came from the Magennis in an article entitled *'Heraldic Emblem of Ulster'*. To be precise, he wrote: "History teaches us that already in pagan days it was adopted by the O'Neills from the Macgennis, who were princes in the north of Ireland in the region inhabited by them."[45]

Can you genuinely look at the story of Conall Cernach and the Uí Eachach, which is based in historical poetry and mythology, and still view the dubious origin's given for the Uí Néill's claim to the Red Hand of Ulster as more reasonable? That, for some reason, these Gaels were racing to Ireland with Vikings or that this Scottish Clan (Which, notably, still isn't the Uí Néill) triumph Cernach and the Uí Eachach? The Dextra Dei reason still wouldn't entitle it to solely the Uí Néill, maybe you could view it as a reason for *why* it came to Ireland & Ulster specifically, but it wouldn't entitle it to only the Uí Néill. Aside from these reasons as well, the head of the O'Neill family literally admitted the symbol came from a Cruthin tribe!

4. Sétanta, Cernach and the Red Branch Knights

Another possible origin[46] for the Red Hand of Ulster is the Red Branch Knights. Leaders of these knights included Sétanta[47] and Conall Cernach. They belonged to only Ulster[48] and dedicated themselves to the defence of Ulster.[49] Sétanta, or his more common name of Cú Chulainn, likely came from the tribe of Setantii who lived in Lancashire.[50] This would make Sétanta a Briton alongside the fact he is a cousin to Conall Cernach, he'd likely have a small amount of Cruthin DNA. During the War of The Trees, the Red Branch Knights fought their enemy until all weapons were exhausted. The last knight, armed with a branch from a red tree, killed the last of the enemy, protecting Ulster. Due to this, they earned the title of the Red Branch Knights.[51] Surely the irony of this is not lost on the Republicans, claiming an Ulster hero (who was likely not even Gaelic) that defended Ulster from the southern provinces in service of Ulster.

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[45] Lisbon O'Neill, p.g., 3 of '*The Heraldic Emblem of Ireland*,' *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 14, no. 4 (November 1908): 178–80 – archive.org and archive.is links

[46] Stephen A. Brighton, p.g., 8 of "Symbols, Myth-Making, and Identity: The Red Hand of Ulster in Late Nineteenth-Century Paterson, New Jersey," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (June 2004): 149–64 – archive.org and archive.is links

[47] Rev. W. O'Halloran, '*Early Irish History and Antiquities, and the History of West Cork*', 1916 – archive.org and archive.is links

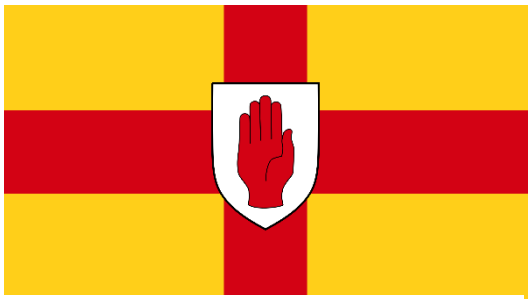
[48] P.W. Joyce, '*The Red Branch Knights and the Fianna of Ireland*,' Libraryireland.com, 1906 – Archive.org and Archive.is links

[49] Ulick O'Conner, *'Irish Tales and Sagas'* (Town House, 2003).

[50] Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, p.g., 131–136 of '*Myth, Legend & Romance*' (Orion, 1990).

[51] Stephen A. Brighton, p.g., 8 of "Symbols, Myth-Making, and Identity: The Red Hand of Ulster in Late Nineteenth-Century Paterson, New Jersey," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (June 2004): 149–64 – archive.org and archive.is links

5. Walter de Burgh



Flag of the province of Ulster

Much of these 4 last pages rely on speculation and mythology to trace the origin of the Red Hand of Ulster, but the first official use of it shall be discussed now. The first official use of the Red Hand was by the English de Burgh family.[52] Walter himself had continually harassed the king of Connacht Fedlimid O'Connor[53] and – helping King Henry III secure English rule in the island. Richard de Burgh, Walter's father, expelled the Gaelic king Felim O'Connor from Connacht[54]. Walter's grandfather, William de Burgh, was vital in the annexation of Limerick and helped fortify the lordship of Waterford alongside massive raids into Connacht.[55] It's important to remember that the Earldom of Ulster was an English lordship (similar to a government) and part of the Lordship of Ireland. This makes it similar to the Kingdom of Ireland which Republicans tend to refer to as "occupied Ireland".

This means that the first official use of the Red Hand of Ulster was by an English family who continually fought the Gaels and helped England rule over the island of Ireland – "occupy it". Many centuries later, in the early 20th century, another group would begin using this flag as well – although they do not anymore – they were the Ulster Unionist Council, a progenitor of the modern Ulster Unionist Party. Even centuries after the Earldom of Ulster, it was still figures wanting to be governed by the British that adopted this flag.

One must find humour in the Republicans flying their Ulster Province flag during their pitiful terrorist displays and murals, proudly showing the flag of English governance in the island of Ireland.

A UUC propaganda art piece, showing prominent anti home rulers: Sir Edward Carson, PM Bonar Law, Col. Wallace and Sir James Craig.

[52] Donald M. Schlegel, p.g., 60 of '*Reweaving the Tapestry of Ancient Ulster*,' *Clogher Record* 17, no. 3 (2002): 689–750, https://doi.org/10.2307/27699470. – archive.org and archive.is links

[53] Ronan Mackay, "Burgh, Walter de | Dictionary of Irish Biography," www.dib.ie, October 2009 – archive.org and archive.is links

[54] Edmund Curtis, p.g., 81 of '*A History of Ireland*' by Edmund Curtis (Methuen & Co Ltd, 1936) – archive.org and archive.is links

[55] David Beresford, "Burgh, William de | Dictionary of Irish Biography," www.dib.ie, October 2009 – archive.org and archive.is links

6. Conclusion

The historical record clearly shows that the Red Hand of Ulster traces its origins to Conall Cernach, a Cruthin hero from Ulster, associated with the kings of Dál nAraidi. It was from this lineage that the Cruthin adopted the Red Hand as a distinctive emblem, a symbol later incorporated by Walter de Burgh into his family's crest to form the flag of the Earldom of Ulster in the mid-13th century, representing British governance in the island of Ireland (through the Lordship of Ireland) and Ulster in particular. Though the O'Neills sought to appropriate – if not downright steal – the Red Hand of Ulster a century later, they were repeatedly reminded of its Cruthinic roots in bardic disputes. Despite this, over time the O'Neills came to be popularly associated with the symbol — an appropriation even conceded by the head of the O'Neill family in the early 20th century when he acknowledged the symbol's Cruthin origin. Thus, this essay contends that the Red Hand is not inherently the Red Hand of the O'Neills, but rather the Red Hand of the Cruthin.

This perspective holds particular resonance for members of the PUL (Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist) community, especially those of Ulstèr-Scotch descent. Dr. Ian Adamson has argued that the Ulstèr-Scotch may, in fact, be distant descendants of the Cruthin. This is possible, considering the Cruthin's displacement following the Battle of Moira in 637 AD and their perceived "return" during the Plantation of Ulster in the 17th century[56]. Should this lineage be correct, it would offer the Ulstèr-Scotch people a legitimate, ancestral claim to the Red Hand of Ulster

Whether the Ulstèr-Scotch are the Cruthin or not is contentious. The question now is if the Ulstèr-Scotch are the metaphorical or literal sons of the Cruthin, given their role as defenders of Ulster from the southern provinces of this island. Even despite this question, the Ulstèr-Scotch people are sure to have more claim to this ancient symbol of resistance to the southern provinces than those who want to colonise Ulster into a hostile Republic, despite centuries of failure to do so.

[56] Dr. Ian Adamson writes about it in his article *'Genes of the Cruthin'* (Archive.is link) and *'Sykes and the Genes of the Cruthin'* (Archive.is link). This thread on Eupedia, *'I2a2 in Scotland is not Germanic, but Neolithic British!' Cruthin'* (Archive.org and archive.is links) also goes into detail about the gene, this is relevant given the Cruthin may have been Neolithic.